After Jacqueline Rose, What Is Left? The Play of Identity and Representation in Russell Hoban's *Turtle Diary*

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> *People write books for children and other people write about the books written for children but I don't think it's for the children at all. I think that all the people who worry so much about the children are really worrying about themselves, about keeping their world together and getting the children to help them do it . . . .*
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> *—Russell Hoban,* Turtle Diary

Since its publication in 1984, Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* has been something of a thorn in the side of many who work with children's literature, although not all: Karín Lesnik-Oberstein has been prominent in assenting, while others, notably Perry Nodelman, have become partial apologists for Rose.[1] For many, though, there remains a concern with the way Rose addresses problems of identity and representation—specifically, a concern that representations of the child have been rendered so suspect as to leave a literature actually *for* children struggling to escape from its apparent impossibility.

I am going to do something a little unusual in this paper and reapproach this problem through its consideration within a fiction for adults. Russell Hoban is probably better known for his sixty works for children (notable among which are *The Mouse and His Child* and the Frances the Badger series) than for his sixteen novels for adults (the most acclaimed of which is *Riddley Walker*). *Turtle Diary* is clearly informed by Hoban's work in children's fiction and features a children's author as one of its two protagonists. Though not overtly *about* children—it is centred, rather, on relationships with animals—the book's commentary on children's literature and its analogies between animals

and children suggest that this story, ostensibly about two adults trying to decide whether to free some turtles from the London Zoo, is also about children's interests, their representation, and the implications of these for the construction of adult identity. It speaks thus to certain of the theoretical concerns that would occupy Rose almost a decade after the novel's publication in 1975. In Hoban's engagement with these concerns, however, he also recognizes and explores—in a way that Rose does not—the practical consequences of a line of inquiry that ends in impossibility. In the process, he addresses a question often implicit in objections to Rose: "After impossibility, what is left?" (Owen 258).

If *Turtle Diary* can be read as a "response" to Rose, however, it is a response of a very different order. As a fiction composed of its protagonists' private (and frequently contradictory) thoughts—"disconcertingly intimate," Christine Wilkie calls it (46)[2]—Hoban's novel is not obliged to reconcile its parts monologically the way a work of theory is. Its value to us here lies rather in its free-ranging, pointedly disunified exploration of the complex tensions within which relationships to an Other are negotiated in lived experience. It is, in a sense, a document of intellectual deviancy and perversity. (It might even be called a work of anti-theory, though on the understanding that much going by that name has been concerned to trouble theory from within and not simply to oppose it.[3]) Each of its protagonists is engaged in a struggle to find a basis for ethical and personally meaningful action in the face of just that impossibility described by Rose—in essence, the impossibility of overcoming the self's interests in producing representations of an Other. Taking impossibility, thus, not as a terminus but as a starting point, Hoban situates his adult protagonists' self-theorizing within a context of "real world" implications and consequences both for the self and for the Other—whether that Other is the child, the animal, or children's literature itself as an Other to the theory that interpellates it. In considering these texts side by side, this paper considers how Hoban's exploration of these impossible relations suggests ways in which impossibility might be recast as provisionality, and how it points to the recovery of play as a means and condition of moving beyond intellectual cul-de-sacs into an open-ended encounter with the Other.

Rose's position is that "children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book . . . in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp" (2). Children's literature, in this sense, is never really "for" children at all (1). It denotes an "impossible" category built on "the impossible relation between child and adult," impossible because "[t]here is no child behind the category 'children's fiction,' other than the one which the category itself sets in place, the one which it needs to believe is there for its own purposes" (1, 10). Childhood is constructed as a site of mythical

origin, as a "primitive or lost state to which the child has special access"; consequently, the child is rendered as "something of a pioneer who restores these worlds to us, and gives them back to us with a facility or directness which ensures that our own relationship to them is, finally, safe" (9). This construction is supposed to "guarantee a certain knowledge of ourselves" that will thereby deny "the anxieties we have about our own psychic, sexual and social being in the world" (xvii).

Rose insists she does not mean that all such writing should actually stop or that some alternate, ideal form of writing might exist that she would promote in its place (140). For many of her readers, though, there remains a feeling that, while she may be correct (up to some point or other), she leaves little indication as to how children's writing and the work around it might in fact proceed. The situation has been summarized by Gabrielle Owen:

> Perhaps what troubles us most about Rose's book is the word *impossible*. It is right there in the title, taunting us. She is talking to us. She is talking about us. And it sounds like she is saying that our parenting is impossible, our teaching impossible, our reading and writing for children impossible. It is of little comfort that Rose does not mean this literally. . . . What does it mean, then, to be in an impossible relation? And where does that leave us as critics, as writers of children's books, or as parents and teachers who work with children every day? These are questions about the lived reality of her claims. . . . After impossibility, what is left? (258)

Owen acknowledges the kind of work being done by Lesnik-Oberstein and others, for whom "the 'child'" is always first and foremost "a construction," and for whom the primary task is always to deconstruct the various ways in which it is supposed "that children exist and can be known" (Lesnik-Oberstein 9). As Owen argues, however, such work "privileges certain kinds of questions while making others seem irrelevant," effacing in particular a set of difficult but equally vital questions pertaining to practical necessity (266). She suggests that, as scholars, "we might do better to acknowledge the dialectic between working out how to *think* about something and what to *do* about something" (266).

The negotiation of just such a dialectic troubles the two protagonists of *Turtle Diary*. They have reached impasses in their lives and spend a great deal of time thinking about things—even about *doing* things—but comparatively little actually doing anything. William G., a divorced former account executive now working in a bookstore and living in a bedsit, has exhausted himself with thinking. "The mind moves ahead of every action making me tired in advance of whatever I do," he complains, finding "[n]o place for the self

Turtle Diary thus situates the work done with children's literature within the "lived reality" of a general being-in-the-world, where "impossibility," Hoban suggests, might be found anywhere one looks for it.

to sit down and catch its breath" (85). The equally depressive Neaera H., an unmarried children's author and illustrator, has become both unable and unwilling to continue writing children's books, largely because she suspects that writing *for* children is, indeed, impossible. *Turtle Diary* thus situates the work done with children's literature within the "lived reality" of a general being-in-the-world, where "impossibility," Hoban suggests, might be found anywhere one looks for it. It demonstrates, moreover, that critical thinking (at least, in certain circumstances and modes) can become a kind of "doing" in itself, one liable to obscure and displace "the things that really need attention paid to them" (44).

Comparisons between Hoban's commentary on children's literature in essays and interviews and Neaera's opinions in *Turtle Diary* suggest that the latter's concerns are substantively his own. He has frequently complained, in particular, about the adult representation of children's interests. He argues that "[w]hat we call education is mostly training for approved behaviour" ("Time Slip" 42) and protests the use teachers make of children's books, including his own, condemning it as a form of "industrialization": "I don't want 'We've done two units on you'" ("Russell Hoban" 104). In his view, the extraction of use value is just one of the many means by which "most of us, as adults, impair our children's capacity for being . . . without meaning to" ("Time Slip" 43). Children doing "units" are taught to displace the intrinsic value of experience, something found not in formalized learning but in "hereness"—a condition of receptivity favouring open-endedness, experimentation, and "a search for usable truths, truths that satisfy real needs and real wants" ("Time Slip" 33, 34). Citing John Holt's *How Children Fail*,

Hoban argues that the interests of parents and teachers in childhood often displace this open-endedness and "hereness" with an anxious urgency, justified in terms of the child's continuing development, to move from the moment to what the adult supposes ought to come after it ("Time Slip" 43–45). Children subjected to this anxiety, he holds, begin to "lean forward mentally, lean uphill and feel tired" (44). Eventually, they grow up to become anxious adults themselves; children obliged to do "units" become adults trained to "produce 'product,'" their adult lives thus becoming "endless repetitions of childhood defeats" ("Russell Hoban" 104; "Time Slip" 42). He is most optimistic when speaking of children's resistance to this: "That so much of our educating is being rejected and vomited up by the children it is stuffed into is one of the most hopeful signs in a not very hopeful-looking time. It shows the stubborn health of the human soul" ("Time Slip" 42).

This concern with the impingement of adult anxieties on childhood is apparent in the first pages of *Turtle Diary*. Visiting the London Zoo and observing the animals caged there, William offers impressionistic reports that juxtapose animals with the children taken to see them, contrasting an apparent state of anarchy (of animalhood, of childhood) with alienating mechanisms of structure and control: "Over the bridge past the Aviary towering high against the sky, a huge pointy steel-mesh thing of gables and angles full of strange cries and dark flappings. There were little shrill children eating things" (7). William visits the aquarium, where he finds sea turtles contained in "shabby," "grotty" conditions—a "glass box of second-hand ocean," he calls it—but he observes them seemingly refuting their imprisonment, "[s]oaring, dipping and curving with flippers like wings" (8). Beside them in the dark tunnels of the aquarium and similarly corralled, children likewise persist in spontaneous expressions of "hereness," defying the imposition of learning and embracing instead the surrounding darkness: "People black against the windows murmuring, explaining to children, holding them up, putting them down, urging them on, calling them back. Echoing footsteps of children running in the dark" (8). Leaving the aquarium, William reflects despondently on the predicament of a gorilla in a cage: "I couldn't think what was worse: if he could remember or if he couldn't" (8). Then, waiting for the bus home, he watches a child playing with a rubber gorilla suspended on a piece of elastic. Bouncing it into a puddle on the pavement, the boy seems to be exploring, as William himself has just been doing, ideas and feelings of his relationship to gorillaness. The image recalls Freud's famous "fort/da," the game of "gone" and "there" in which a child negotiates between selfhood and otherness by repeatedly casting away an object and drawing it back on a piece of string (8–9). It recalls, too, the anxiety of those adults to whom this play had seemed a "disturbing habit"

and something to be ended (8). This is echoed in the closing words of Hoban's chapter when the boy's mother reprimands him: "Stop that," she says to him. "I told you to stop that" (8). It is clear that this child is not permitted to explore his relationship to an Other in a state of "hereness"—that is to say, in terms that speak to his own inquiry—but is to remain, as it were, dutifully pressed to the glass in silence. The reader, moreover, is left to wonder whether the child might come to share the gorilla's fate—whether this metaphorical caging might likewise lead him to forget where he has come from, to forget what it is to be a child. The chapter thus frames the central concerns of the novel: we note William's concerns about the adult construction of children's interests, repeated in the image of caged animals that either are defeated by their conditions or else survive by defying them, but we also see his own incapacitating anxiety in respect to this. "[W]hen I was a child I used to like the Zoo," he says (8), but now he sees evidence only of his own alienation, of himself as a defeated child. Overwhelmed by impossibility, he can think only in terms of "what was worse."

Independently of each other, William and Neaera become troubled by the captivity of the sea turtles, and each begins fantasizing about stealing the turtles and setting them free in the ocean. They become aware of each other's preoccupations and agree to collaborate on a rescue. In the process of doing so, each spends considerable time reflecting on problems of identity and representation, primarily in relation to the turtles themselves, but also in regard to the other birds and animals they encounter in trips to the Zoo, as well as in films, poetry, photographs, and book illustrations. Indeed, the central plot of *Turtle Diary*—the freeing of the turtles—makes up a relatively small portion of the text, the majority of which is an almost stream-of-consciousness articulation, through alternating chapters, of each character's struggle to produce a coherent sense of selfhood in relation to the animal Other.

William and Neaera are motivated to free the turtles because they believe that it is unethical to keep imprisoned indefinitely an animal that, they suppose, would otherwise be pursuing its natural impulse to swim fourteen hundred miles to its Ascension Island breeding grounds—that the turtles "can find something and they are not being allowed to do it" (42). Subtending this, however, is a hope that freeing the turtles will somehow free them as well, that it will launch them into their own sense of selfhood, purpose, and direction. Yet their incapacitation repeats itself even within their effort to find a way out of it. They lapse, at times, into an almost obsessive self-analysis of their motives and objectives, repeatedly questioning whether it is reasonable to make the turtles symbolic of their own feelings of being caged (or of their desires to be free from such feeling) or reasonable to suppose that one could, in fact, ever know what is actually good

for the turtles. In wrestling with these questions, they oscillate between anthropomorphizing and striving to open to these animals' alterity, between investing their identity in relationships with them and questioning their interests in doing so, and they struggle between these poles to find a basis for ethical action: "There is no place for me to find. No beach, no breeding grounds," decides Neaera at one point, asking herself: "Do I owe the turtles more or less because of that?" (43).

She and William manage, in the end, to carry their plan through to success. Yet they do so without ever resolving their highly conflicted feelings about their relationship to this Other, and *Turtle Diary* finally suggests that a coherent objectification of the problem might not be possible, or even desirable. Hoban, I think, would agree with Owen's conclusion about adult relationships with children: that "[t]he project of determining what it is the child really wants is not something that can be done in generalized terms, or in a book of academic scholarship, but only something that can be partially and contingently known in a fleeting exchange between one person (maybe a child) and another (maybe an adult)" (261). Neaera's and William's moments of clarity in action are always of this kind: always fleeting, always bounded by seemingly irreconcilable impulses and conclusions. While none of the positions they oscillate between is able to provide in itself the answers they are looking for, their multiple, conflicted notions nonetheless represent in their totality what the novel would seem finally to advocate, which is the possibility of an open-ended play with representations of the Other—a play in which *everything* is permissible, even if only within the privacy of one's own head. If one were to draw from the novel a single image for this, it might be of the boy "danc[ing] the little black gorilla up and down" (8). This is, in effect, what William and Neaera are doing all along, though their anxiety has robbed it of the quality of play, of "hereness."

To understand how *Turtle Diary* points toward a possibility of ethical action arising from an impossible relation between self and Other, we need first to consider how their struggle with generalized terms impedes the protagonists' capacity for action.

Problems with Identity and Representation

Turtle Diary situates William's and Neaera's struggles within a dynamic tension between two competing imperatives. The first of these is to assert knowledge of the Other: knowledge enables the self to become oriented in respect to the Other, so that meaningful, ethical action toward it becomes possible. Knowledge of the Other might also, to borrow from Rose, "guarantee [the protagonists] a certain knowledge of [themselves]," denying thereby "the anxieties [they] have about [their] own psychic, sexual and social being in the world" (xvii). William

and Neaera are riddled with such anxieties: "I don't want to be naked with anybody now, especially myself," discloses William (71), and Neaera is similarly discomfited in her relation to herself: "My face does not look back at me now when I look into the mirror" (50). "Identity is a shaky thing," she notes (88). When this imperative is privileged, the turtles come to represent for them (as children do for adults in *The Case of Peter Pan*) the possibility of an unmediated connection to the natural world, to a "primitive or lost state" that might be recovered through the Other's "special access" to it (Rose 9). For Neaera, the turtles are "a magical reality, juice of life in a world gone dry," and she feels alienated from the sense of selfhood and purpose that reconnection might enable (50). "I'm always afraid of being lost," she says; "the secret navigational art of the turtles seems a sacred thing" to her, and she hopes that investment in this sacredness might allow her to recover some comparable means of navigating her own life (27). When the turtles are considered in these terms, ethical behaviour toward them becomes unproblematic; much as children's literature, for Rose, strives to show children what childhood is supposed to be, Neaera's (and William's) objective is simply to honour the turtles' magical reality by restoring the creatures to their natural condition. And precisely because the turtles are *already* supposed to belong to nature (though like children, they still must be returned to it), William and Neaera need not consider how their own interests might be shaping their representation of the turtles' interests. Thus, watching over the turtles en route to the coast, Neaera can confidently assert, "When they felt themselves once more in ocean they would simply do what turtles do in ocean, their readiness was whole and undiminished in them" (134).

William's own "fantasy of origins," of an "ultimate beginning

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where everything is perfect or at least can be made good" (Rose 138), leads him to experiment with a New Age practice called Original Therapy, in which one seeks explicitly to return "to the origin of life" (Hoban, *Turtle Diary* 102). Locked in the practitioner's oxygen-depriving scissors grip, the participant is said to journey back beyond "the primordial soup," arriving at "something like the idea of a question, a kind of original YES or NO?" and then to a recovery of the original "big YES" that gave rise to Being. For William, the turtles' vocabulary is comprised entirely of "YES," and so they perfectly embody the desired absence of anxiety. Their minds never move ahead of their actions: "Green turtles must have the kind of mind that doesn't think about sharks unless a shark is there" (12).

Such images of the Other prove unstable, however, and problems arise when the very effort to deny anxiety through identification with the Other results instead in a projection of anxieties *onto* the Other. William and Neaera find themselves haunted then by images of the *Other* of the Other—which is to say, of the dangers the turtles would face if set free. Dreaming of herself as a turtle, "swimming, flying, green ocean over me, under me, touching every part of me," Neaera is startled by "a glimmering white shadow coming up from below" (76–77).[4] The dream reflects her own anxiety as a "swimmer"; unlike the turtles, she is prone to thinking about metaphorical sharks before they are actually there. But it also represents her anxiety about acting on behalf of the turtles, which, if released, will be exposed to a real threat from sharks on their way to Ascension Island, and this concern undermines her commitment to freeing them.

Problems likewise arise when William and Neaera find themselves wondering whether it might in fact be impossible (to borrow again from Rose) "to invest in [the turtles'] sweet self-evidence, impossible to use the translucent clarity of [turtles]" to deny their anxieties (xvii). "Is my wanting to set the turtles free . . . a trying to pretend that something is when it isn't?" Neaera asks herself, while William doubts whether identity really can be grounded in representations of the Other: "Why turtles for God's sake? Helping them find what they are looking for won't bloody help me" (35, 70). That the pursuit of identity through a "fantasy of origins" might be unhealthy becomes apparent when a participant in an Original Therapy session slips into a spontaneous rebirthing experience. Hoban points here to an association between representations of nature and fantasies of an origin in childhood as a "primitive or lost state" (Rose 9); when all the other participants suddenly want to try this too, William detects "an awful lust for infancy" in them (106). Having already suspected that there is no way to derive selfhood from knowledge of the turtles, "[n]o way to hold the sun in the eye, be held by it swimming, swimming" (20), and having criticized himself for "having turtle fantasies instead of living life" (55), he finds that the

act of freeing the turtles has failed to consolidate his identity in relation to them: "I felt absurd, couldn't find a place to put myself in relation to the three turtles now in the sea. What in the world did it all mean?" (148). "Launching the turtles didn't launch me," he concludes. "You can't do it with turtles" (172).

Such doubts give rise to a conflicting imperative, marking the opposite pole, as it were, of the representational problem: to withdraw the self from projection onto the Other so that the Other can be known as it is in itself, unfalsified by one's interests in it. Privileging this imperative, William and Neaera reveal an awareness of the effects of representation. Neaera, for instance, critiques the form of representation that is the display of animals at the zoo. Observing oystercatchers, she realizes that they have paradoxically been rendered "so accessible as to be unobservable," for their imprisonment by display has obscured the reality of these birds as she has known them in nature, "from a distance on the open mudflats with a wide and low horizon far away" (24). The Other, she finds, can only be known by releasing it from the captivity of one's investment in it.

Problems arise here, too, however. In questioning her tendency to anthropomorphize, Neaera discovers that her critique has merely constituted another form of representation. "The birds," she suddenly realizes, "were not silent prisoners wasting away like Dr Manette in the Bastille nor were they beating pitiful wings against the wire mesh of their captivity" (25). Such insights leave her with no foundation for knowledge at all, and this too erodes conviction in freeing the turtles: "Perhaps they no longer want the ocean and I'm wrong to impose my feelings on them" (59). Even after choosing to free them, she continues to feel overwhelmed by the impossibility of adequately withdrawing the self: "I shall never be able to stand far enough back to see the whole picture. I shall die in blind ignorance and rage" (156). William similarly expresses the impossibility of knowing the Other without representation: "Prisons are all we know how to make," he says (20).

Yet more troubling to them is the possibility that an absolute openness to alterity—should such a state actually be possible—might leave the Other merely blank and without definition. Rendered ultimately unknowable, the Other would present no meaningful way to act in respect to it—would present, in fact, nothing at all. Identity, moreover, might find itself positively at risk of annihilation, for the unknowability of the Other makes the knowing of *any* self—including one's *own* self—impossible. The opening chapter of *Turtle Diary*, as noted above, presents the Other (child and animal) as partially captured by representation, but these same passages also present a converse predicament in which the spectre of the Other's immediate presence portends a profound threat to being. William's visit to the zoo is precipitated by

a dream in which he is haunted by the presence of an octopus. In the morning, he hunts for pictures at the bookstore, but finds here too that the octopus's otherness overwhelms him: "Their eyes are dreadful to look at. I shouldn't like to be looked at by an octopus no matter how small and harmless it might be. To be stared at by those eyes would be altogether too much for me, would leave me nothing whatever to be" (7). He is nonetheless compelled to visit the zoo, anxious to see one—as if the obliteration of the self would provide at least some kind of answer to the problem of a shaky identity. Neaera is similarly anxious about turtles and equally compelled to encounter one: "I'd been aware of the turtles for some time before I went to look at them. I knew I'd have to do it but I kept putting it off. When I did go to see them I didn't know how to cope with it. Untenable propositions assembled themselves in my mind. If these were what they were then why were buildings, buses, streets?" (26–27). She finds, when thinking this way, that things become "all blank and baffling" (88), and William has a similar experience: "I dreamt that nothing had a front any more. The whole world was nothing but . . . utter blankness. . . . Just blank terror" (78–79). Thus, while both feel that it ought to be possible, somehow, simply to *be*, to leave the world alone in its being and to know the self in respect to it, neither has any idea how to resolve the intellectualizing of such notions into a way of actually living in regard to the Other.

Problems with Children's Literature

These concerns regarding children, animals, and representation coalesce around Neaera's writer's block. As the reader and Neaera herself come to realize, her problem is no mere lack of inspiration. Rather, creative writing has come to seem less a way of engaging with the world than of occluding it: "Suddenly I don't know, haven't the faintest idea how people make up stories about anything," she says. "Anything is whatever it happens to be, why on earth make up stories" (42). She objects in particular to literary representations of animals:

> I think there is less merit in Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "The Windhover" than there would have been in not writing it. I think that Basho's frog that jumped into the old pond has more falcon in it than Hopkins's bird, simply because it has more things-as-they-are, which includes falcons and everything else. [Windhovers] don't want mannered words but only the simplest and fewest, certainly nothing longer than a haiku and preferably no words at all. (41)

Her own picture books have centred on a series of animal characters, and she comes to feel that Delia Swallow and Gillian Vole (who recall Hoban's own Frances the Badger) ought not to have any more written about them, either. She has been keeping a water

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beetle in an aquarium in the hope that the observation of it might inspire a new story, but she suspects that Madame Beetle has thereby become a prisoner no less than the turtles in the Zoo—"the prisoner of my flagging invention," she calls her—and that this use of her amounts to "insect exploitation" (51, 129). The animals she has been observing, she decides, are far more interesting in themselves than what she has been doing with them: "What I do is not as good as what an oyster-catcher does. Writing and illustrating books for children is not as good as walking orange-eyed, orange-billed in the distance on a river, on the beaches of the ocean, finding shellfish. And of course they fly as well which must be worth a good deal" (49). Of Madame Beetle, she concludes: "I can't think now how it could have occurred to me that I might write a story about her. Who am I to use the mystery of her that way? Her swimming is better than my writing and she doesn't expect to get paid for it" (76).

There is an echo here of the line in Rousseau's *Émile*, which Rose uses as an epigraph for her second chapter—"Let there be no other book but the world"—and of the first lines from *Émile*, which Rose quotes later: "Everything is perfect, coming from the hands of the Creator; every thing degenerates in the hands of man" (qtd. in Rose 42, 44). In Rousseau and in the writing that comes after him, childhood is, as Rose notes, represented as "a primitive state where 'nature' is still to be found if only one gets to it in time" (44). While Rousseau holds that education, though itself an artificial process, is justified because without it "the child would be even more totally disfigured by social institutions," Neaera has no such faith that the ends might justify writing as a means. Given that animal characters in picture books are often stand-ins for children, her wish not to corrupt (her relationship to) Madame Beetle's natural condition might suggest a similar desire to sustain the child's connection to nature as a bulwark against cultural degeneracy and the loss of an identity-grounding origin. Unlike

Rousseau, however, she requires this connection to be immediate, untainted by literary supplementation. "Anything is whatever it happens to be," and nothing is to stand for anything else.

Ironically, it is this hyper-Rousseauean distrust of writing that leads to Neaera's strongest alignment with Rose. Increasingly discomfited by her own work as a children's author, she becomes invested instead in literary criticism; inebriated at a party, she finds herself "going on and on" to a publisher about classic literature and children's literature, about "Thebes and Mr McGregor's garden" (99). Two days later, she is surprised to receive a letter from the publisher "affirming his strong interest in [her] forthcoming *From Oedipus to Peter Rabbit: The Tragic Heritage in Children's Literature*." Yet, as much sense as she made to herself while drunk and as lucrative as the offer is, she discovers that she has misread her own concern with tragedy: "On the morning when the letter came I was thinking that possibly the biggest tragedy in children's literature is that people won't stop writing it" (99). She discovers misgivings about criticism, too, which she realizes (like Rose) merely repeats a problem with writing for children (see Rose 2). There follows the passage I used for an epigraph to this paper, an extract that I quote here in full:

> People write books for children and other people write about the books written for children but I don't think it's for the children at all. I think that all the people who worry so much about the children are really worrying about themselves, about keeping their world together and getting the children to help them do it, getting the children to agree that it is indeed a world. Each new generation of children has to be told: "This is a world, this is what one does, one lives like this." Maybe our constant fear is that a generation of children will come along and say: "This is not a world, this is nothing, there's no way to live at all." (100)

The resemblance to Rose's argument is clear: children's literature attempts to teach children *how* to be children and does so to deny adult anxieties about "being in the world" (xvii). At the same time, though, it is as if Neaera, who distrusts all representation and actually does stop writing children's literature, has anticipated Rose's argument and taken it too much to heart.

That she has thought herself into an intellectual cul-de-sac is illustrated through Hoban's analogical interweaving of her reflections on the publishing offer and on the representation of animals. Having watched a documentary about people who travel the world seeking the thrill of diving with great white sharks, Neaera becomes angered by the arrogance of these divers. They swim without risk, protected by cages, yet seem tremendously self-affirmed by the experience. She describes them as "*frotteurs*" and insists that,

however close they may think they have got to the shark, "they have not really seen him or touched him because what he is to man is what he is to naked man alone-swimming. They have not found the great white shark, they have acted out some brothel fantasy with black rubber clothing and steel bars" (98–99). Here too is a correspondence with Rose: in much the same way that there is "no child behind the category 'children's fiction,' other than the one which the category itself sets in place," there is no shark beyond the cage, other than the divers' representations of it. This relation is supposed to affirm identity through connection to a "primitive or lost state" in a manner "which ensures that [the divers'] own relationship to [that state] is, finally, safe." It is a relationship of mastery, in much the same way that the scandalous sexuality of the child, which likewise threatens to disturb safe boundaries (those between adult and child), is contended with *not*, as Freud thought, by "total resistance" to the notion of child sexuality, but as Rose says, by making it "an object of curiosity and investigation, something to be mastered" (15). Evidently feeling herself implicated by these notions, Neaera declines the publishing offer and abandons her own production of picture books.

If turtles represent the Other in its benign aspect—as passively dependent upon one's ethical action (perhaps, as a child might be on an adult's) and as that which might secure one's identity—then the shark is the Other in its opposite guise: requiring nothing, devastatingly indifferent to all investment in it, it is a perpetual threat to one's very being. These are two sides of the same thing, of course; the turtles have also been experienced as a threat to identity that Neaera "didn't know how to cope with," as a refutation of the possibility even of "buildings, buses, [and] streets" (26–27), while sharks are likewise both "innocent and murderous" (99). (As elsewhere, we find that the two poles of the representation problem fold into each other.) The problem for Neaera is that, however much merit there may be in her critique of the divers, it merely substitutes one impossibility for another. It establishes an obligation that is impossible for her to meet, for only annihilation would follow should she better the divers and actually swim naked and alone with great white sharks. (The prospect repeats her fear that, should adults cease using children to deny their anxieties, they might find that "[t]his is not a world, this is nothing"—an existential apprehension in both senses of the word.) It is not surprising, then, that her dreams are haunted by "a glimmering white shadow coming up from below," or that her pursuit of knowledge should manifest as a death drive: "the shark's mouth too," she says, "is after all a place of rest, they call them *requin*" (77). The ending of *Turtle Diary* describes the fate of those who, overwhelmed by impossibility, can find no rest but in *requin*: when the body of the despairing Miss Neap (William's fellow tenant) is found hanged in her room, her *Book of Common Prayer* is

open to *At the Burial of the Dead at Sea* (181).

Neaera and William's choice, in the end, is a Sisyphean one: to free the turtles despite having no way of knowing whether this will actually be good for the animals and despite their skepticism about the implications, if any, for their own sense of identity. As mentioned earlier, this uncertainty lingers even after the turtles are freed. The uncertainty itself, Hoban suggests, is key, however, for in this willingness to form a relation with the Other, despite the apparent absurdity of doing so, they open most fully to the turtles in their alterity: they discover a form of relation that is based not in certainty and a denial of anxiety, but in a shared condition of uncertainty and vulnerability. In their perplexed longing for (rather than finding of) a "YES," they find identity with the turtles' equally incomprehensible drive to cross fourteen hundred miles of shark-ridden ocean.

Queering the Space of Representation

If the possibility of ethical action must arise, as *Turtle Diary* suggests, from the uncertain and conflicted space between competing imperatives, then the occupation of this space seems positively to require a degree of inconsistency in constructing representations of the Other. Gabrielle Owen suggests that queer theory provides a means by which to refigure this kind of problem: "Queer lives," she notes, "are often defined by impossibility" in that they "fall outside of intelligibility, fall outside of definition, outside of what is usually understood as reality" (258). In queer theory, the categories of gender and sexuality are thus understood "not as stable, but as shifting, malleable, and contextual" (255). By considering this "theorized complexity as belonging [also] to the child" (255), the problem of "impossibility" can be relocated to the "ever-present tension between theory and identity politics" that is already characteristic of "scholarly conversations in feminist studies and queer studies" (265)—a tension, put simply, between the deconstruction of representations and the assertion of real presences. Owen insists on the practical necessity of affirming knowledge amid categorical uncertainty: while those who work in "education, psychology, library science, publishing, and even parenting . . . are continually reminded of how little we can know about the child," it nonetheless remains that the work done in such fields must "essentialize [children] at times": "[t]he essentializing or 'knowing' in this work," she insists, "has a rhetorical immediacy that may be necessary to get things done" (266). This is, structurally, the same tension presented by *Turtle Diary* in respect to animals, particularly where the very refusal to reduce the Other to any particular representation is found, paradoxically, to require an image of the Other around which to organize this resistance. Even while critiquing her "exploitative" use of Madame Beetle, for example, Neaera persists in calling the animal by name, an

anthropomorphization that repeats the very effacement of alterity that Neaera is striving to overcome. Yet, it is just this failure to be entirely thorough in doing so that enables her to assert the presence of the beetle as a subject of empathy and ethics. In the following, we see Neaera first essentializing the condition of the turtles, then asking herself how they feel in partially anthropomorphized terms, then questioning whether it is valid to think this way, and then insisting again on the qualified essentialism that provides a basis for an ethical response: "The essence of it is that they can find something and they're not being allowed to do it. . . . How must they feel? Is there a sense in them of green ocean, white surf and hot sand? Probably not. But there is a drive in them to find it" (43). If there is an impossibility really worth emphasizing, perhaps it is the impossibility of managing *without* essentializing; the goal cannot be to expunge this, only to ensure that it is perpetually balanced "by revision, by exceptions, by the exploration of previous misunderstandings and inadequate definitions" (Owen 266).

Neaera's and William's failure to resolve their conflicting views constitutes such a perpetually revised "knowing." There is a certain element of playfulness, even, in the way they turn their ideas about, and though a sense of this is largely displaced from their own anxious self-accounting, it shows through in Hoban's light-handed depiction of their exertions. The net effect of this is to affirm a freedom to explore one's relationship to the Other through the broadest possible imaginative engagement, to bounce rubber gorillas into puddles without that foreclosing anxiety in which the mind moves always ahead of its actions. Hoban would, it seems, assent also to Owen's assertion that "it is better to savor the gaps, to leave room for ways of knowing, being, and interpreting that perhaps aren't what we thought they were, that might turn out to be queer, strange, or contradictory" (267). When representation emerges from such gaps, it becomes not a static way of knowing, but the provisionalized product of an open dialogue—of something Hoban has elsewhere called a "continuous conversation that is trying to happen between everything around us and us" ("Pan Lives" 174). This sense of "conversation" is not anchored in any language of the self, but rather it describes a condition of openness in which the "known" becomes open to perpetual disruption by whatever is Other to the self. It requires, thus, a capacity for what he calls "perceptive ignorance," a condition in which one maintains "a respectful relationship to something not fully understood," "respectfully offering the mind to the thing, . . . holding the mind open to all of the thing" ("Time Slip" 45; "Pan Lives" 176). The need for such openness follows from the conditions in which identity is shaped; as Owen notes, "identity is not something we arrive at, finally, once and for all, but something more fluid and contradictory" (267). She cites Judith Butler: "There

is always a dimension of ourselves and our relation to others that we cannot know, and this not-knowing persists with us as a condition of existence and, indeed, of survivability" (15; qtd. in Owen 267). An embracing of "not-knowing" marks William's and Neaera's strongest moments of clarity in respect to the turtles. Neaera—refusing to "lean uphill"— decides at one point of their plans: "On reflection I really don't want to understand it better. It may be silly and wrong and useless, it may be anything at all but it seems to be a thing that I have to do before I can do whatever comes after it" (64). Later, as she and William dine together before embarking on their journey to the coast, they find themselves celebrating an ignorance born as much of mental exhaustion as practical necessity—though the moment is undone when anxieties about knowledge and responsibility return:

When representation emerges from such gaps, it becomes not a static way of knowing, but the provisionalized product of an open dialogue . . . .

"Do you know anything?" I said.

"Not a bloody thing," she said.

"Don't know what's best for anybody?"

"Not even for myself. Especially not for myself."

"Wonderful," I said. I raised my glass. "Here's to not knowing anything."

"I'll drink to that," she said, and raised her glass. We both laughed, it just came out.

"Except the turtles," I said. "We know what's best for the turtles, eh?"

"Oh shit," she said. No laughter. "It seemed to want to happen, didn't it."

"Yes," I said. "It seemed to want to happen." Her face was sad. (128–29)

They press on despite these misgivings, and once committed to action, they find themselves experiencing that "hereness" which privileges not stabilized knowledge, but openness and fluidity: "[J]ust be all the way in it and you're all right," decides William (138); "[I]t seemed all at once that I didn't need any answers to anything. . . . I felt free of myself, unlumbered. . . . Everything was what it was and the awareness of it was part of it" (142). "Our part in the rhythm of things was to put the turtles in the sea and however it went would be the way it went," declares Neaera. "I felt relaxed and invulnerable" (140).

Doubts return following the success of the mission, but here, too, the novel seems positively to resist the kind of closure that might be pursued "in generalized terms, or in a book of academic scholarship" (Owen 261). The closest Hoban will come to a generalized statement on the matter is voiced by George Fairbairn upon William's and Neaera's return. The zookeeper responsible for the turtles, George has quietly facilitated their plans against their burgeoning apprehensions, and he is the model in the novel for an ethics of unanxious not-knowing. On first seeing him, William detects "an air of decency about him, as if he paid attention to the things that really need attention paid to them" (44). Fairbairn later tells them: "There's nothing you can do about this, you know. . . . Nothing to be done really about animals. Anything you do looks foolish. The answer isn't in us. It's almost as if we're put here on earth to show how silly they aren't. I don't mind. I just like being around them" (158). This is, in effect, a gentler restatement of a thought expressed earlier in existential anguish: "This is not a world, this is nothing, there's no way to live at all" (100). "Nothing to be done" means not that nothing *can* be done (*not* freeing the turtles would have been a doing, too, and Fairbairn clearly supports their choice), only that actions must be performed, and meaning found, in the absence of answers known in advance. Understanding that anything one does looks foolish, it becomes possible to assert one choice over another. Neaera is thus able to conclude that "[i]t *had* been a good thing to do and not a foolish one" (170).

In opposition to Rose, and despite their lingering doubts, William and Neaera finally experience moments in which a relationship with the Other, if only temporarily, affirms a workable sense of identity and an assuagement of their anxieties about being in the world. Precisely because Neaera no longer requires the turtles to perform this role for her, she is able to find in relation with them a moment of qualified assurance:

> With my eyes closed I could still see the sunlight. For a moment I saw ocean, sharp and real, the heaving of the open sea. . . . The turtles would be swimming, swimming. It *had* been a good thing to do and not a foolish one. Thinking about the turtles I could feel the action of their swimming, the muscle

> contractions that drove the flippers through the green water. All they had was themselves but they would keep on going until they found what was in them to find. . . .
>
> I was in my ocean, this was the only ocean there was for me, the dry streets of London. . . . I had as much as the turtles: myself. At least I too could die on the way to where I wanted to be. (170)

Despite having concluded that "[y]ou can't do it with turtles," William, too, finds himself moving toward "doing it." Picturing the turtles swimming, "[n]ot thinking about it. . . . Just doing it," he recovers a sense of momentum in his own life through reconnection to his childhood and to the children lost to him through divorce (160). Brawling with an inconsiderate fellow tenant he had been too afraid to confront, he finds himself, ironically, locked in a scissors grip and experiencing the kind of rebirthing that had earlier repulsed him. As the oxygen fades, he is surprised to discover in himself a "YES," and suddenly realizes that "I was wrong to feel the past no longer mine"; "I was umbilically connected to all pasts but why labour it," he jokes (154). Though William's and Neaera's triumphs are small and qualified, they are triumphs nonetheless. "Nothing was better or different and I didn't think I was either," William declares, "but I didn't mind being alive at the moment. After all who knew what might happen?" (190).

Hoban is not arguing only for a benefit to the self in acting for the Other, however. As mentioned above, Miss Neap's death represents the fate of those overwhelmed by impossibility. The closing of the novel around this event is also a reminder, though, that inaction has implications beyond the self. This late and unexpected disturbance within William's world recontextualizes what has come before; impossible relations, we are to understand, are not unique to children or animals, but might be found anywhere. The fate of the freed turtles remains unknown—as it must, for resolution would only precipitate a false teleological closure, as if the right answer could have been known in advance; if, on the other hand, they had not been freed, there might be no way to discern then either whether this choice had done them harm or good. But if "[n]othing to be done" does not mean that nothing *can* be done, neither does it mean that there are not "things that really need attention paid to them." At the coroner's hearing, William and his fellow tenants are embarrassed to hear that, in making her funeral arrangements, Miss Neap had reported that she lived alone. "I wondered how long it had been since Miss Neap had had nine people paying attention to her all at once," says William. "Draw near and give your attendance. . . . No one had done it when she was alive" (186).

At the conclusion of the novel, Neaera remains uncertain about her future as a children's author. Hoban's own ongoing career as a writer of children's

books (half of his output postdates *Turtle Diary*) might, however, indicate that Neaera has been, at best, half right in her skepticism about children's literature, and we are left to hope that she might find a means of proceeding despite her doubts, as she has done with the turtles. In any case, she is, at the end of the story, no longer perturbed by the representation of animals. Feeling relieved of "tired complexity," she experiences a return of playfulness in enjoying with George Fairbairn (whom she has taken as a lover) a muted trumpet's *Muskrat Ramble* (176), and though she had earlier acknowledged, while critiquing Hopkins, that she has become "less reasonable than [she] was when young," she rediscovers a childlike delight in poetry—particularly in Lear's happily nonsensical renderings of the voyage on life's impossible oceans:

> And everyone said, "If we only live,
> We too will go to sea in a Sieve,—
> To the hills of the Chankly Bore!" (Lear 137; qtd. in Hoban, *Turtle Diary* 184)

"What was there to write?" she asks; and though she is not yet ready to decide, impossibility is clearly no longer an obstacle: "Anything, everything," she declares (170). Toying briefly even with a new Madame Beetle story, she is surprised by her embrace of something once so unthinkable: "The perversity of the human mind!" she exclaims (170). It is a perversity that Hoban clearly celebrates.

Rose's work provides only a partial representation of the relationship between children and adults. Any given representation of *anything*, arguably, can be deconstructed to reveal the trace of the self's interests in that construction and the impossibility, thus, of relation. Precisely because this is so, to employ, sustain, or defend a given representation (such as when childhood or nature is essentialized) is liable to appear naive or even ideologically suspect, and an anxiety to expunge the trace (such as we see with Rose, and sometimes with William and Neaera) can end up effacing the "lived reality" in which representation remains nonetheless both inevitable and "necessary to get things done." William and Neaera, at least, can divulge their responses to the world in (literary) privacy. To critique, however, is always in a sense to read publicly, to "lean forward" out of the moment and into the "production of product" ("This is what I would say of this text"), toward mastery, and toward the satisfaction of those adults who are no longer parents or teachers, but one's peers, one's interpretive community. Such reading is liable thereby to filter, not only from its productions but from consciousness itself, the myriad fleeting, irreconcilable, and even publicly inappropriate thoughts that, as Hoban demonstrates, are nonetheless a vital part of the conversation going on between the self and the world.[5] Read as a response to Rose, *Turtle Diary* offers a recovery of provisionality, something sometimes

lost when representations are captured by critique (which is itself, inescapably, a form of representation); and of play, of "hereness," of running in dark passages, of what Owen calls "a capacity to let go in the moments that come later" (266). It suggests, finally, that impossibility itself is the very condition from which meaningful encounters with children, and with the child of the self, are free still to emerge. What is left after impossibility may not be so amenable to theorizing as the impossibility of children's fiction, but Hoban offers in place of this William's contemplation of T. S. Eliot's "East Coker," a poem about the recovery of communion in the face of failed intellectualism. Eliot wrote there: "In order to arrive at what you do not know / You must go by a way of knowing which is the way of ignorance" (17). It is an idea that informs *Turtle Diary* throughout and it applies to the work we do as critics and theorists as much as to would-be turtle liberators. Our theorizing requires attention to its own gaps, to the lived realities that theory can finally capture no more than children's fictions can secure the child; within these spaces of "hereness," as William learns from Eliot, "For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business" (17; qtd. in Hoban, *Turtle Diary* 160).

Notes

[1] See, for instance, Lesnik-Oberstein 8–10, 35–36, 127, 158–64. Nodelman argues that, while Rose misses "the complexity underlying the simple childhood described in texts of children's literature," her attention to the construction of childhood in children's fiction nonetheless provides "ways of understanding not just the simplicity but also the complexity of apparently simple books" (239, 237).

[2] Wilkie now publishes as Wilkie-Stibbs.

[3] See, for instance, W. J. T. Mitchell's *Against Theory*, the introduction to which concedes that the book might as well have been called *A Defense of Theory* (Mitchell, "Introduction" 1).

[4] Compounding the confusion arising from identification with an Other, Neaera then projects her anxiety about the shark onto William, rushing to his bedsit fearing that the shark is somehow "his" and that the vision meant he was planning to do away with himself: "'Well, it wasn't mine,' I said lamely, hearing how idiotic I sounded" (89).

[5] Hoban explores the problem of filtering in *Angelica's Grotto*, in which an art critic discovers that he cannot keep his private thoughts private, and in his essay "Thoughts on a Shirtless Cyclist," where he argues that room must be made in the mind for the "sequential and often warring selves within us" (23).

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